



Office of Extended Education • Humboldt State University

Maya Field Studies: Culture, History & Activism in Central America

THE ANCIENT MAYA

Anthropology/ANTH 492 • 4 semester units • Instructor: Bret Blosser, Ph.D

BRIEF COURSE DESCRIPTION

Maya civilization flourished in the subtropical Petén forest of northern Guatemala for more than 1,500 years, until about 900 AD. Divine kings ruled polities connected through kinship, ritual, trade, alliance, and warfare. Vibrant acropoli of palaces, temples, tombs, and ballcourts rose in complex agricultural, arboricultural, hydrological, and forest landscapes. We study ancient Maya achievements in statecraft, theology, calendrics, literacy, astronomy, mathematics, art, and subsistence systems, with particular attention to the Classic Maya florescence and collapse. We learn how archeological knowledge is produced and consider archeological tourism in contemporary Maya lives and the role of the ancient past in the present Maya Movement. Our learning takes place at archeological sites, in Maya communities, and in forests in northern Guatemala.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To gain an overview of the Mesoamerican culture area.
2. To grasp the basic trajectory of development and the variety of ancient Maya civilization.
3. To understand the basics of ancient Maya subsistence systems and the relevance of prehispanic subsistence methods today.
4. To understand current theories of prehispanic Maya gender systems, class relations, and rulership.
5. To grasp basic elements of ancient Maya iconography, calendrics, cosmology, and literacy.

COURSE OUTLINE

Overview

1. Mesoamerican geophysical, biotic, and cultural regions
2. Survey of Mesoamerican cultural history, 3000 BC to the present
3. Mesoamerica as culture area
4. The production of archeological knowledge

The Classic Maya of the Petén lowlands

1. Antecedants
 - a. Olmec civilization: first complex Mesoamerican culture
 - b. Preclassic florescence in northern Petén fores
2. Subsistence
 - a. Adaptation to the tropical forest ecosystem of the Petén lowlands
 - b. Plant domestication in Mesoamerica
 - c. Agriculture, arboriculture, animal husbandry, hunting, fishing
 - d. Maize and *milpa* in ritual and ideology
3. Social and political organization
 - a. The household group
 - b. Settlement patterns
 - c. Commoners: farmers, traders, craftspeople
 - d. Women and the gender system
 - e. Elites: dynasties, kingship, courtly life, ideology, power

- f. Urban architecture and design: palace, temple, plaza, causeway
- g. Statecraft, political ideology, political ceremony
- h. Inter-state dynamics: elite gifts, wife-exchange, long-distance trade, political instability, warfare, captive sacrifice, tribute
- i. Tikal and Teotihuacan: long-distance diplomacy
- 4. Cosmology, political ideology, and literacy
 - a. Cosmology as statecraft: the blood of kings, ritual architecture, "theater state," ceremonialism and political power
 - b. Pantheon: deities, ancestor worship, divine kingship
 - c. Calendric cycles, astronomical knowledge
 - d. Hieroglyphic writing, iconography, literacy
 - e. Sacred landscape
- 5. Classic Maya Collapse
 - e. Regional variation, shared structural problems and processes
 - b. Theories and debate

Postclassic Maya, Spanish invasion, and Spanish Colony

- 1. Florescence in the northern lowlands
- 2. Spanish invasion and occupation
- 3. Colonial Period Maya resistance, adaptation, innovation, continuity

REQUIRED TEXTS

Selections from:

- Arden, Traci. 2002. *Ancient Maya Women*. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.
- Demarest, Arthur. 2004. *Ancient Maya: The Rise and Fall of a Rainforest Civilization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harrison, Peter D. 1999. *The Lords of Tikal: Rulers of an Ancient Maya City*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Joyce, Rosemary A. 2000. *Gender and Power in Prehispanic Mesoamerica*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Montgomery, John. 2002. *How to Read Maya Hieroglyphs*. New York: Hippocrene Books.
- Sabloff, Jeremy A. 2003. *Tikal: Dynasties, Foreigners, and Affairs of State*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- Schele, Linda, and Peter Mathews. 1998. *The Code of Kings: The Language of Seven Sacred Maya Temples and Tombs*. New York: Scribner.
- Tedlock, Dennis. 1985. *Popul Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

ITINERARY (TENTATIVE)

June 26

Arrive in Guatemala City, travel to Antigua.

June 27 and 28

Orientation and overview. Lectures by instructor, discussion of previously assigned readings. Julio Cochoy, an economist with the Guatemalan Government Department of Human Rights, lectures on the recent civil war, Maya cultural resurgence, and Maya immigration to work in USA.

June 29 to July 2

Travel to Tikal National Park in the Peten forest of northern Guatemala. Group in residence at Tikal National Park, a Classic Maya archeological site. Comprehensive exploration of the site in the company of the instructor. Students undertake projects—such as drawing hieroglyphs—designed to develop their capacity to perceive and comprehend Classic Maya architectural patterns, iconographic communication, and hieroglyphic texts. Readings and discussions for the Ancient Maya course.

July 3 and 4

Travel to Yaxchilan, a Classic Maya site situated within a horseshoe bend of the largest Peten river, Rio Usumacinta. Explore the site in the company of the instructor, discuss architecture, glyphic texts, and art. Discussion of the impact of the recent civil war on Maya settlements in the Usumacinta region.

July 5 to 7

Prepare for trip to El Mirador, a Preclassic archeological site in Peten, Guatemala. Walk two days with mule support through the Peten forest to the site.

July 8 to 12

Group in residence at El Mirador. Explore the site in the company of the instructor and project archeologists. Assist archeologists with investigations. Participate in evening classes in spoken English and Spanish literacy for Guatemalan workers. Students undertake individual projects on a Preclassic Maya topic or on archeological methods by interviewing archeologists. Lectures, readings, and discussions.

July 13 to 15

Travel from El Mirador to Finca Ixobel.

July 15 to 17

Group in residence at Finca Ixobel, a lodge in the Peten district of northern Guatemala. In this quiet location we recover from two and a half weeks of travel and review what we have learned for the Ancient Maya course. Students present their research projects and take the final exam for the Ancient Maya course. We begin readings, discussions, and lectures for the second course, The Maya in Guatemala.

July 18 and 19

Travel to Panajachel at Lake Atitlan in highland Guatemala. Orientation to Maya life in the highlands.

July 20 to 25

Group in residence in Panajachel. Lectures and discussions for the second course, The Maya in Guatemala: Culture, History, Current Issues. We learn backstrap weaving from two expert weavers in the village of Santa Catarina Palopo. Two Maya ritual specialists spend several days with us teaching about Maya ceremonial life and healing. They conduct rituals, calendar-based divination, and sweat baths for our group. Students begin individual research projects--based upon interviews with Maya people including ritual specialists, weavers, and cultural activists--for the Maya in Guatemala course.

July 26 to August 1

We spend seven days in San Pedro La Laguna at Lake Atitlan. Local experts teach us about economic development, agriculture, medicinal and dye plants, healing methods, and spiritual life. Ajpub' Garcia, a native of San Pedro and linguist at the Universidad Rafael Landívar, introduces us to calendric practice, sacred landscape, and ceremony. We teach English in the village secondary school. Students continue their fieldwork on a cultural topic by interviewing our Maya hosts and instructors.

August 2 and 3

Students' project presentations. Review and test for the Maya in Guatemala course.

August 4 and 5

Travel to Antigua where we reflect on the program and prepare to leave.

August 6

Travel to the international airport in Guatemala City by airport van for return flights.

EVALUATION

For this course students undertake several "short assignments" and one "research assignment." The assignments are designed to engage students with two aspects of the program—the opportunity to experience the actual contexts of contemporary, historic, and ancient Maya life and the opportunity to learn directly from experts (both Maya and non-Maya) about contemporary and ancient Maya life. Our assignments further the following program objectives:

1. To impel students to engage with and learn from our Maya hosts, local experts, and archeological sites.

2. To enable students to practice learning through interaction with people and through experience and observation of places such as archeological sites, tropical forests, cornfields, and villages. The instructor provides students with training and coaching in ethnographic fieldwork methods such as “participant observation,” “fieldnotes,” and interviewing. The instructor directs students’ attention to selected aspects of visited places.
3. To develop connections between information from lectures and readings, our experience of contemporary Maya life, and encounters with ancient Maya sites. The assignments build on lectures and readings but draw primarily on students’ experience with Guatemalan people and places.
4. To enrich learning by directing students to generate and share insights on program topics.

“Short assignments” are designed to focus students’ attention on specific elements of a place or social context for the period of one or a few days. Students are asked to contribute observations and thoughts on the assigned topic during a group discussion scheduled that evening or within a few days. “Short assignments” are not graded. Rather, the instructor tries to create a discussion climate in which students reward each other for quality contributions to our learning. “Research assignments” are designed to impel students to deeper understanding of a chosen topic, primarily through engagement with our hosts and other local experts. Students present their discoveries and analysis to the group in an oral presentation. The instructor teaches methods, suggests topics, and coaches students in the learning process.

Assignment work takes place at Tikal National Park and El Mirador (both are archeological sites within a tropical forest), and Lake Atitlan (where we visit three villages). Examples of assignments are as follows:

1. At Tikal, after reading and lecture on Classic Maya writing, students are given a “short assignment” to make line drawings of hieroglyphs on monuments in the main plaza. In a later discussion we analyze copied glyphs. The primary purpose of this assignment is to have students learn to perceive details of Classic Maya visual communication.
2. Students undertake the “research assignment” for the Ancient Maya course at El Mirador where we are in the company of 250 local workers and archeologists. They are asked to interview either an archeologist or a Maya worker. Some archeologists speak English. Interviews might address aspects of the site, archeological method and theory, archeological tourism, or roles of the ancient Maya in contemporary Guatemalan life. Students will have fundamental knowledge on these topics from reading and lecture. Interviews with Maya workers might address views of the site and the ancient Maya, knowledge of forest resources, or experience of forest work. Student project presentations take place at a tourist lodge where we reside for a few days after our visit to El Mirador.

Oral presentations for the two research projects are graded as follows:

Quality of research: Were the methods appropriate, was the approach creative, was sufficient effort devoted?	33%
Quality of information: Does the presentation extend our understanding of the topic?	33%
Quality of analysis: Does the presentation connect the study to broader topics, are patterns distinguished and analyzed?	33%

Grades for each of the two courses are based on the following elements:

Final exam	50%
Project presentation	45%
Participation in group discussions, instructor-led activities, and host-led activities. Appropriate participation entails attention, respect, and effort in activities and thoughtful contribution in our group discussions.	5%

The grades used in this course will be as follows:

A+	98-100	B-	80-82	D+	67-69
A	93-97			D	63-66
A-	90-92	C+	77-79	D-	60-62
		C	73-76		
B+	87-89	C-	70-72	F	Below 60
B	83-86				

Sierra Inst. "Maya Field Studies" (Su.2009) Ancient Maya (ANTH 492) course schedule:

dates	topics	reading & assignments	hours
June 26-28	Overview of syllabus and logistics of visits to Tikal, Yaxchilan, and El Mirador.	"Sacred Space, Holy Time, and the Maya World," <i>A Forest of Kings</i> , Linda Schele and David Freidel. "Flint-shields and Battle Beasts," <i>Maya Cosmos</i> , David Freidel, et al.	1
June 29 to July 2	Lectures and site tours addressing Classic Maya social organization, economy, ceremonialism, and history with attention to calendrics, hieroglyphics, iconography, and architecture at the Classic Period site of Tikal.	<i>The Code of Kings</i> , Linda Schele and Peter Mathews, Ch 1. <i>Reading the Maya Glyphs</i> , Michael D Coe and Stone, Ch 2 and Ch 3. Students undertake projects—such as drawing hieroglyphs—designed to develop their capacity to perceive and comprehend Classic Maya architectural patterns, iconographic communication, and hieroglyphic texts.	17
July 3 and 4	Lectures and site tours addressing architecture, glyphic texts, art, and warfare at the Classic Period site of Yaxchilan.	"The Not So Peaceful Civilization: A Review of Maya War," David Webster.	6
July 5 to 15	Lectures and site tours by Mirador Basin Project archeologists at the Preclassic Period site of El Mirador with attention to Preclassic Maya social organization, economy, ceremonialism, and architecture. Instruction by project archeologists in archeological method and theory.	Students assist archeologists with their investigations and participate in teaching evening classes in spoken English and in Spanish literacy for Guatemalan workers. Students undertake individual projects on a Preclassic Maya topic or on archeological methods. Reading: "Kings of Stone", David Stuart.	17
July 15 to 17	At Finca Ixobel we review the Ancient Maya course.	Students present their research projects and take the final exam for the Ancient Maya course.	4
August 4 and 5	We reflect on our study of the Ancient Maya.		1

TOTALS

Lectures and formal discussions by instructor, local scholars, and archeologists and interpretive tours at Tikal, Yachilan, and El Mirador led by instructor and archeologists.	46
Informal discussions led by instructor	20
total	66